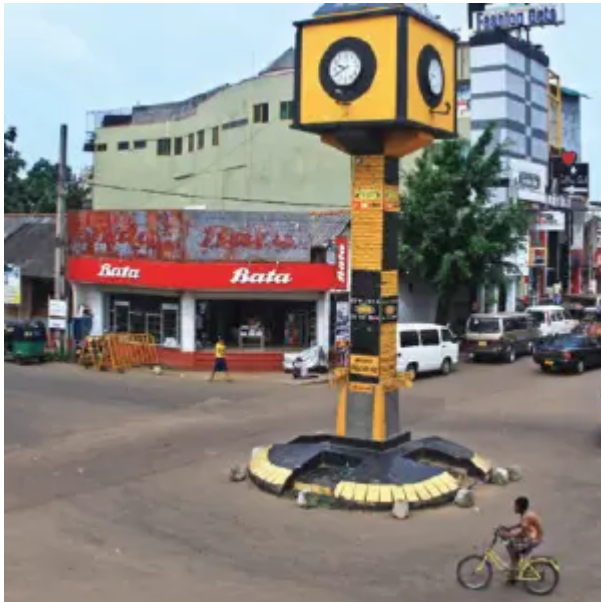


Negombo To Kalpitiya: Beyond The Golden Mile



Words Kamalika Jayathilaka Photographs Mahesh Prasantha

Bustling with people and activity are the narrow streets of Negombo as we begin our journey along the North West coast up to Kalpitiya. The town is a kaleidoscope of colour made vibrant by the street vendors' stalls selling everything from fresh fruits and vegetables to handkerchiefs. As we move slowly along further north through its 'golden mile', a stretch of beautiful golden beach adorned with a blend of hotels, restaurants, cafés and art galleries, we are fortunate enough to take in the dazzling variety of the curios, jewellery, handlooms, batiks and of course beautiful art, picturesque and inviting to the eye of the discerning traveller.

Passing beautiful houses and majestic churches that take us back to an old Dutch era, and edging our way through peaceful little townships, we cross over the Maha Oya at Kochchikade and reach the area called Waikkala, famous for its clay roof-tile factories. Scattered along either side of the road are these large red-bricked buildings with their sky-high chimneys, overpowering and unique in their looming structures. As the sky gathers clouds and begin to release a soft drizzle, we pass Wennappuwa, Marawila and Madampe, patches of coconut plantations and thick groves of Mara trees making up most of the way. Chilaw, famous for its crabs and coconuts is next in line and is the first large town after Negombo that

we encounter with more fruit sellers and thambili (king coconuts) sellers beckoning the passers by to stop and enjoy their fresh taste. We speed ahead resisting the urge to comply.

Leaving Chilaw behind, and a few minutes off Bangadeniya we are met with a breathtaking stretch of inland swamps, looking green and tranquil with an abundance of local bird species. The purple swamp-flowers are in full bloom, a haven for the butterflies and bees busily buzzing and feasting on their natural lushness. As we stop in the cool shade to take in this mesmerising serenity only disturbed by an occasional coconut truck whisking past, I get entrapped in my own imagination for a few good minutes, heightened by the music of the birdsong and the rejuvenating breeze.

Refreshed we continue our journey north, and reach Mundel a little after midday. Here, I have to squint my eyes at the first glimpse of the shining blue-grey waters of the Mundel lagoon as the ferocious sea breeze push against the moving vehicle. We stop again to lunch at a local eating place overlooking the lagoon and indulge in typical Sri Lankan home made cuisine served in clay pots, sending out a mouthwatering aroma from the local spices blended in.

A few more quiet little towns away and further north in our route we turn left at the Palavi junction, the threshold to the Kalpitiya peninsula. As soon as we steer left we are greeted by a large sign that says 'welcome to the salt city', followed by acres and acres of calm and still whiteness of the Puttlam salterns.

Moving steadily against the wind beating noisily against the car windows, we drive through a narrow strip of sea lined road and mangrove swamps passing Mampuri, Palyadi and Norochcholai reaching Pala-kudawa junction. A three kilometer diversion westwards from this point leads us to the famous St Anne's Shrine at Thalawila. We are instantly captivated by its mystic beauty and grandeur; and walking along the shady gravel footpath towards the church doors we are overwhelmed by a sense of calmness. Thronged by pious pilgrims during the month of March, the sandy church grounds seem empty but for the coconut and palm trees that silently sway against the sea breeze. A few hundred yards away lies the beach with only a few boats and sea birds keeping it company.

It is late afternoon as we close in on Kalpitiya town so far unspoilt and untouched by tourism. Walking amongst herds of goats and laughing children, we admire the untarnished splendour of this peninsula town, and witness the oldest Dutch house in the country with its authentic structure and beautiful latticework. Asking for

directions to the nearest beach we soon stumble upon the Kandakkuliya beach tucked away a few kilometers off the town and finally, having reached our destination, we become silent observers of the calm blue sea, its obedient waves slowly flapping against the golden shore bringing in deep sea treasures each time it comes and goes.

As dusk settled in rhyme with the seagull chants, the grey-blue sea blended in with the cloudy skies in a soft misty haze, far more rare than an everyday sunset and as we turn to walk away from this amazing spectrum of beauty, I look back once more, hesitant to leave, and pick up a pale blue sea-shell as a nature's unique memento to the fascinating seaside... Kalpitiya.

